DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 846 CS 214 993

AUTHOR Graves, Heather
TITLE Under the Students' Gaze: Three Contexts for Feminism in the Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Styles; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Feminist Pedagogy

ABSTRACT

In an essay in "College English," Cheryl L. Johnson argues that whether or not a female teacher considers herself a feminist she must at some point confront, at least within herself, the material conditions of herself as subject in the classroom. Three options are available for the woman composition teacher who wants to or has been forced to confront her own subjectivity as a teacher. One approach grows out of what Elizabeth Flynn, in her recent review "Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition," identifies as "cultural feminism"--feminism that "focuses on differences between women and men and promotes 'women's ways,' ways that often result from women's biological and social roles." One version of this approach invokes the teaching-as-mothering metaphor and emphasizes the nurturing and guiding roles of the teacher. This approach has been most fully articulated by theorists like Nancy Hartsock, Cynthia Caywood, and Gillian Overing. Another type of approach that grows out of cultural feminism is represented in the work of feminists like Catherine Lamb, Susan Osborne, and Susan Hunter, who define classroom practices that highlight feminism and feminist modes of expression such as mediation rather than argumentation in the writing class. A third type of feminist approach in the classroom seems most closely allied with what Flynn calls "radical feminism." This perspective, characterized by Susan Jarratt, Dale Bauer, and Bell Hooks, advocates using the classroom as a sometimes uncomfortable space to "help...students locate personal experience in historical and social contexts." (Contains 22 references.) (TB)

Heather Graves

Under the Students' Gaze: Three Contexts for Feminism in the Composition Classroom

In a recent essay in *College English*, Cheryl L. Johnson describes how (white) students in her African-American literature classes respond to her and the texts in ways that she cannot foresee or control based on her racial/gendered body. She argues that the intersections of "the students' gaze" with the social, cultural, and political contexts in which she is living, combined with how she positions herself and has been positioned in the academy, often displace the pedagogical methods, style, and content that she intends to use in her classroom. Johnson's essay argues strongly that there is no neutral space that a woman teacher (and perhaps *any* teacher) can occupy in the classroom because students bring certain culturally-conditioned expectations into the class with them. Teachers who ignore or reject these expectations must ignore or reject or perhaps ultimately be forced to confront certain gender- or race-related dynamics that take place in the classroom. Johnson's essay also suggests that whether or not a female teacher considers herself a feminist she must at some point confront, at least within herself, the material conditions of herself as subject in the classroom.

What, then, are the options for the woman composition teacher who wants to or has been forced to confront her own subjectivity as a teacher? In this paper, I will sketch out some of the theoretical possibilities available by providing a brief history of feminist pedagogical theory in composition. One approach grows out of what, in her recent review "Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition" in *College English*, Elizabeth Flynn identifies as "cultural feminism which "focuses on differences between women and men and promotes 'women's ways,' ways that often result from women's biological and social roles" (202). One version of this approach invokes the teaching as mothering metaphor and emphasizes the nurturing and guiding roles of the teacher. This approach has been most fully articulated by theorists like Nancy Hartsock and Cynthia Caywood and Gillian Overing. Another type of approach that grows out of cultural feminism is represented in

the work of feminists like Catherine Lamb, Susan Osborne, and Susan Hunter who articulate classroom practices that highlight feminism and feminist modes of expression such as mediation rather than argumentation in the writing class.

A third type of feminist approach in the classroom seems most closely allied with what Flynn calls "radical feminism" that foregrounds difference. This perspective, characterized by Susan Jarratt, Dale Bauer, and bell hooks, advocates using the classroom as a sometimes uncomfortable space to "help . . . students locate personal experience in historical and social contexts."

The Teacher as Mother

Due to political and socio-economic factors, feminism has been a strong force in composition, especially composition pedagogy, for more than a decade. In 1987, the English Coalition Conference advocated "interactive, process-oriented, and student-centred" (Hunter 1991, 231) methods of teaching. Members of the coalition contended that these methods would facilitate critical inquiry, collaboration, and reflection as goals in the classroom. They also maintained that these goals could be achieved through the following classroom activities: "freewriting, dialectical notebooks, journals, writing to learn, peer reviews, small group discussion, portfolios, workshops, conferences about drafts and revision" (Hunter 1991, 232). Many of these activities contribute to a decentered classroom, where students must assume control over their own writing and learning processes. In a decentered classroom, the teacher must relinquish some measure of authority when students begin to tutor one another. While such practices are not necessarily feminist, they are generally characteristic of the feminist classroom. One way in which the feminist composition classroom differs from conventional pedagogies lies in the course goal of working against patriarchal ways of thinking, writing, and teaching. It works against patriarchy by foregrounding a feminist discourse based on cooperation, dialogue, and augmentation rather than competition and hierarchy (Hunter

1991). Feminist pedagogy discourages the traditional masculine-type skills of professing (lecturing) and passing judgment (making distinctions about the quality of ideas) and encourages questioning (group discussion) and the desire to understand (tentative exploration of ideas). Some feminist teachers try to match their pedagogy to their ideology by adopting an enabling, student-centred pedagogy where power is shared among the members of a writing community and the political purpose of the writing course is openly acknowledged. Nancy Hartsock characterizes this type of relationship between the feminist teacher and the student as a version of idealized mothering. It emphasizes the benign and nurturing aspects of the teacher's role:

> The female experience not simply of mothering (but more broadly the general education of girls for mothering, and the experience of being mothered by a person of one's own gender) is one in which power over another is gradually transformed by both the powerholder and the being over whom power is exercised into autonomy and (ideally) mutual respect . . . . Thus the point of having power over another is to liberate the other rather than dominate . . . her. (1983, 257)

Hartsock describes a collaborative, supportive, accepting climate that is one of the desired goals in this type of feminist composition classroom. Her vision of power is one that empowers the subordinate members through the teacher's sensitive use of her position. There are several drawbacks to this approach, not the least of which is that it maintains a hierarchical structure that is philosophically opposed to feminist goals. There are other drawbacks which Becky is going to talk about in her presentation in a few minutes.

Teacher and Course Material as Explicitly Feminist

A second manifestation of cultural feminism's influence in the composition classroom lies in courses that take an explicitly feminist stance in the course material and classroom environment. In "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition" Catherine Lamb proposes mediation as a "feminist response to conflict" (13), an alternative to the traditional mode of discourse: the competitive and agonistic "persuasion/argument"

essay. In "'Revision/Re-Vision': A Feminist Writing Class," Susan Osborn recounts her conception of "revision" as a feminist composing strategy of invention, and she describes a course curriculum that has students explore the relationship between gender and language. A third example of this kind of feminist approach straddles the border between an approach based on cultural feminism and one based on radical feminism. In "The Other 'F' Word: The Feminist in the Classroom," Dale Bauer explains how she attempts to use her feminism to "foreground dialogics in the classroom . . . . to explore the ambiguous and often ambivalent space of values and ethics" (387). She discusses her overtly feminist agenda in the classroom, but she also addresses the ambivalent and often hostile attitudes of students who see a feminist perspective as too personal and too biased for the "neutral" ground of the classroom. In this discussion, Bauer raises the issue of student attitudes in the classroom. If students are hostile, then the nurturing and supportive environment advocated by researchers like Lamb and Osborn may not be possible.

The Teacher Negotiating Conflict

In separate essays, Elizabeth Flynn (1991) and Susan Jarratt (1991a) have questioned whether a naive desire to believe in women's "natural" capacity for love and nurture (and a desire to downplay conflict and confrontation) in the classroom might not, in fact, compromise the feminist teacher (as Bauer implies in her essay). Flynn notes that although she values the "connectedness of woman to woman" suggested in work by Nancy Chodorow (1978) and supported by Belenky and her colleagues (1986), she also recognizes that "women do not always work together cooperatively and are not always good collaborators" (1991, 48). In fact, scholars such as Evelyn Fox-Keller and Helene Moglen have claimed that "the morality of the women's movement, with its emphasis on mutuality, concern, and support, is difficult to implement in the real world situations of the current academic marketplace" (1987, 502). Keller and Moglen imply that feminist

values like collaboration, care, and support can prove too idealistic when applied to real life situations.

Jarratt explicitly addresses the problem with feminist idealism in the classroom. In a recent article, she and six collaborators critiqued the notion that the feminist teacher can safely relinquish authority and decenter the classroom. Based on work by Susan Stanford Friedman (1985), they argue that "we [as women teachers] do not experience the same authority in the classroom as white male, middle-to-upper-class graduate students and faculty. . . . Both our students and ourselves have been socialized to believe . . . 'that any kind of authority is incompatible with the feminine' (207)." This perspective suggests that the feminist impulse to decenter the classroom and share authority with the students may actually play into the hands of a patriarchal society by meeting the students' expectations that a woman at the front of the classroom is not authoritative. This point suggests that traditional feminist composition pedagogy can actually further marginalize women's position in the academy.

Jarratt and her co-authors point out that, in fact, our culture has "negated or trivialized woman's intellect and authority" (Eichhorn et al 1992, 298). Such trivialization means that even the woman teacher who tries to maintain an authoritarian classroom may find herself ignored and her authority questioned. As evidence of this problem with authority in the classroom, Jarratt et al cite work by Bernice Resnick Sandler (1991) to conclude that

> Women faculty still do not experience the same respect from their male and female students as do men faculty. For instance, on an overt level, women faculty are more likely to be asked about their credentials: 'Do you have a doctorate?' 'I can't believe you're a professor.' (7) On a more subtle level, "women faculty may be more likely to be called 'Miss,' 'Ms.,' or 'Mrs.' rather than 'Professor' or 'Dr.'" (8). (qtd in Eichhorn et al 1992, 299)

Many of my students call me "Mrs. Graves" and I was really embarrassed when I read this passage and suddenly recognized the subtle denigration behind this kind of address.

And these are from students who like me! Who think they have gotten a lot out of the course!

In fact, in this article, Jarratt and her co-authors question whether it is possible to relinquish authority if you have never clearly had it in the first place:

> Though we acknowledge the liberatory potential of calling institutional authority into question and revaluing student experiences, some of us question whether a pedagogy which fails to examine multiple power relations can create the best conditions for female teachers who have yet to experience an 'authorizing voice' in the classroom. (Eichhorn 1992, 299)

Before a teacher adopts a decentered and less authoritarian pedagogy, she should analyze the power relationships implicit in the classroom and realize that her own position as authority is less certain and secure than if she were a male. She must experience an authorizing voice before she can relinquish it. Jarratt and her co-authors recount their experiences teaching an overtly feminist curriculum in the writing classroom. They report that often their students discounted their views and authority because their feminist viewpoints were too threatening to the students' world views. Many of us have also had this experience--having our students (women as well as men) reject our viewpoints because they are even marginally "feminist."

Jarratt and her co-authors also critique the notion of the feminist composition classroom as a safe climate. Elsewhere Jarratt has warned that the avoidance of conflict in the classroom can leave "those who adopt it insufficiently prepared to negotiate the oppressive discourses of racism, sexism, and classism surfacing in the composition classroom" (1991a, 106). Indeed she and her co-authors suggest that, like relinquishing authority in the classroom, the idea of the writing classroom as a "safe haven" can be detrimental to both teacher and students:

> How can we teach for radical change if we don't challenge our students' androcentric readings of literary texts or their classist, sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses as they arise in journals, essays, and class discussion? Does challenging these readings and writings necessarily mean denying students' subjectivities? Can there be a truly "safe space," in or out of the classroom? Should there be? Is there in our desire for a

> safe space also a refusal to recognize that our different locations--as men or women, as Anglos or people of color, as faculty or as graduate students--are and have always been unequal? (Eichhorn 1992, 300)

They suggest that the desire to decenter the conflictless classroom might conceal a wish by the feminist teacher to minimize the unequal power relationship between students and teacher, an attempt to evade the question of authority in the classroom.

However, Jarratt et al suggest a new way to view the unequal relationship as one that "legitimizes struggle as positive and productive; it provides the arena to analyze contradiction, identification, and resistance" (Eichhorn 1992, 321). They argue for recognizing struggle as potentially useful and good in the feminist composition classroom. The feminist teacher might look at struggle as a means for asserting her authority in the classroom when appropriate and also as a means for foregrounding other important feminist issues through class discussion. Jarratt et al point out that even while women teachers struggle to persuade students to acknowledge their authority in the classroom, those same teachers also struggle to "discover, respect, and work within the differences . . . students bring with them to class" (Eichhorn 1992, 321). In other words, the teacher's best efforts to avoid conflict will be useless because the differences that students bring into the classroom necessitate some conflict if they are to learn and be taught. Inevitably conflict will arise between students and between teacher and students; the feminist teacher must begin to view such conflicts as potentially productive, as sites where students and teacher can begin to understand and respect one anothers' differences and perhaps discover some connections. Given the prevalence of conflict in modern society, it is perhaps wise for the feminist (composition) teacher to reconceive of conflict in ways that might make it a productive force in the classroom.

However, recognizing the potential usefulness of conflict does not necessarily mean that feminist teachers should abandon attempts to establish a supportive, cooperative class atmosphere or a less-authoritarian classroom. Instead they should remain aware of the difficulties that may be inherent for women teachers in the

decentered classroom and the possibility that "classist, sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses" may arise during the activities in the classroom. They should not ignore such discourses out of discomfort, thinking that conflictual episodes with students are actions that oppose their feminist ideology; they must prepare themselves to engage such discourse with the goal of producing a "serious and rigorous critical exchange" (Hooks 1989, 51). Bell Hooks advocates a pedagogy that Jarratt suggests is perhaps better fitted to the contemporary feminist position than the uncritically-supportive one. Hooks notes that she encourages "students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk. The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous, critical discussion" (Hooks 1989, 53). This position and the rationale behind it constitute a radically different kind of feminist pedagogy from the teacher as mother-figure role, and one that Diana will speak more about in a few minutes.

What I have just given you constitutes a somewhat reductionist and simplified view of feminist pedagogy in composition, based on recent scholarship in the major journals in our field. Now I will turn the floor over to Becky and Diana who are going to talk about their own experiences in the classroom with feminist pedagogy. And we hope to have lots of time at the end of their presentations to talk about what all of you do in your classrooms.

Heather Brodie Graves
Illinois State University

References

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic, 1986.

Bauer, Dale. "The Other 'F' Word: The Feminist in the Classroom." *College English* 52.4 (Apr. 1990): 385-96.

Caywood, Cynthia L. and Gillian R. Overing, eds. *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1987.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

Cooper, Marilyn. "Dualing with Duelism: A Response to Interviews with Mary Field Belenky and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *(Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Literacy*. Eds. Gary Olsen and Irene Gale. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 51-57.

Eichhorn, Jill, Sara Farris, Karen Hayes, Adriana Hernandez, Susan C. Jarratt, Karen Powers-Stubbs, and Marian M. Sciachitano. "A Symposium on Feminist Experiences in the Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 297-322.

Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Authority in the Feminist Classroom: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*. Eds. Margo Culley and Catherine Portuges. Boston: Routledge, 1985. 203-07.

Flynn, Elizabeth. "Politicizing the Composing Process and Women's Ways of Interacting." *(Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Literacy*. Eds. Gary Olsen and Irene Gale. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 45-50.

Flynn, Elizabeth. "Feminist Theories/Feminist Composition." *College English* 57.2 (Feb. 95): 201-12.

Hartsock, Nancy. *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. New York: Longman, 1983.

Hooks, Bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.

Hunter, Susan. "A Woman's Place *Is* in the Composition Classroom." *Rhetoric Review* 9.2 (Spring 1991): 230-45.

Jarratt, Susan C. "Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict." *Contending With Words: Composition in a Postmodern Era*. Eds. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb. New York: MLA, 1991. 105-25.

Johnson, Cheryl L. "The Teacher as Racial, Gendered Subject." *College English* 65.4 (Apr. 94): 409-19.

Keller, Evelyn Fox, and Helene Moglen. "Competition and Feminism: Conflicts for Academic Women." *Signs* 12 (1987): 493-511.

Kirsch, Gesa E. *Women Writing the Academy: Audience, Authority, and Transformation.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.

Lamb, Catherine. "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 42.1 (Feb. 91): 11-24.

Lunsford, Andrea, and Lisa Ede. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing.* Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Mortensen, Peter, and Gesa E. Kirsch. "On Authority in the Study of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 44.4 (Dec 1993): 556-72.

Osborn, Susan. "'Revision/Re-Vision': A Feminist Writing Class." *Rhetoric Review* 9.2 (Spring 1991): 258-73.

Sandler, Bernice Resnick. "Women Faculty at Work in the Classroom, or, Why It Still hurts to Be a Woman in Labor." *Communication Education* 40 (Jan, 1991): 6-15.